



## Jorge Ibargüengoitia's Approach to the Theatre in the *Revista de la Universidad de México*, 1961-1964

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Jorge Ibargüengoitia (1928-1983) is best known today for his novels and satirical vignettes of Mexican life, but his first love was the theatre. He wrote over a dozen plays between 1953 and the early 1960's and also stinted as a drama critic. He penned thirty-one articles for the "Teatro" column in *Revista de la Universidad de México* from March 1961 to July 1964 (Rehder 138-139), writings that were to bring him notoriety as a witty and truculent critic. The tale of Ibargüengoitia's caustic reviews and the resultant counterattacks has been told (Ponce 50-51; Leñero 73-89), but his philosophy of the theatre has not been studied or identified. This study will examine the underlying reasons, explicit and implicit, for his likes and dislikes in order to explicate his critical approach. Since some of his "Teatro" columns stray from the topic of theatre to address matters as diverse as local customs in his native Guanajuato, we will focus on those that pertain to appreciation and theory.

### Naturalism

Ibargüengoitia reviewed no plays which he classified as naturalistic, but he does offer a critique of this kind of drama. After claiming that his generation in Mexico had suffered from excessive exposure to "lecturas naturalistas," he notes sarcastically the defects of this school's stage fare:

. . . el naturalismo es, en cierto sentido, el juego más imbécil que se haya inventado nunca: consiste en crear un personaje defectuoso, ponerlo en evidencia y después echarle un sermón para que se corrija. (17.8: 35; see Works Cited for title, as in subsequent references)

He alludes here to the naturalistic proclivity for depicting environmentally and genetically caused imperfections in its characters. If the flaws are biological in

nature, the person cannot improve his lot; thus, the critic's sour reaction to the other side of the naturalistic coin, which is the prescription to improve the human species.

The audience of naturalistic theatre becomes a healer rather than a viewer:

El espectador deja de serlo para convertirse en una especie de Doctora Corazón, que si no fuera tan cohibida, se metería en el foro para decir "pero lo que necesita este muchacho es que. . . ." (35)

In other words, the public, in response to the parade of suffering, ceases to be observer and vicarious participant in a human drama and becomes, instead, overseer and defender of naturalism's victims.

Ibargüengoitia is aware that not all naturalism is prescriptive. But naturalism without a message may not be acceptable to some viewers, as he notes: "si el muchacho no necesita nada, se dice que la obra carece de mensaje" (35). This is an implied critique of the moralistic critics of naturalistic persuasion for whom victimization without remedy is unacceptable.

The term "naturalism" as applied to theatre may have diverse meanings. One form of naturalistic theatre is that type of performance art which approximates a literal re-enactment of life. Ibargüengoitia does not like this type of naturalistic theatre either, since its underlying tenet is that everyday life, with all its minutia, is significant in itself, "que está llena de significados; . . . que vale la pena de ser copiada." Ibargüengoitia demurs, doubting that repetition of the "copia noche tras noche" (17.1: 31) will serve any useful purpose.

### **Theatre of the Absurd and Intellectual Drama**

Ibargüengoitia concedes that absurdist theatre tends toward universality, abstraction and the metaphorical. He states in his review of Fernando Arrabal's *Fando y Lis* that:

Sabemos de los personajes sólo lo que es universal. Esta parece ser una característica de cierto teatro moderno, que se mueve en un plano metafórico: ambiguo y trascendente, y al cual indiscutiblemente pertenecen tanto Arrabal como Ionesco y Beckett. (16.4: 31)

In other articles he includes among absurdist the predictable names of Jean Genet (15.8: 30) and Edward Albee (17.9: 31).

Ibargüengoitia, who in his own plays and novels is generally a realist with a preference for specified social settings, tends to disfavor many absurdist works, in particular, those prone to abstraction and intellectuality. The intentionally flat and non-specific dialogue of Beckett's *Godot*, set within a static plot structure, bored him: "Ese diálogo es tan real que carecía de todo interés para una persona habituada a ver teatro convencional en el que se cuenta una historia" (17.9: 30).

He disagrees with critics who praise absurdist theatre for its intellectual and non-emotive qualities. Among these taken to task are Carlos Solórzano, who cited approvingly the "fondo muy literario, muy intelectual" in Beckett, Ionesco and Arrabal; and Geneviève Serreau, who praised the "belleza abstracta de una fórmula matemática" in the Arrabal play (both quoted by Ibargüengoitia in 16.4: 30). Intellectual insight and the appreciation of abstract symmetry are not, for Ibargüengoitia, primary objectives of the theatrical experience.

Further pursuing his polemic with Solórzano, he criticizes the latter's admonition that:

. . . la escenificación deberá ser crítica y nunca sentimental, deberá conservar al espectador en el mismo grado de *observación* que los protagonistas guardan respecto a su mundo en vez de despertar en ellos un sentimiento blando de simpatía o de compasión. (16.4: 31)

Ibargüengoitia counterposes Solórzano's image of analytical spectators scrutinizing cold-eyed characters with a much older idea of the theatre: ". . . la del griego, que precisamente pretendía provocar en el espectador *la piedad y el terror* . . ." (16.4: 31). That emotional reaction in the viewer is, of course, antithetical to the aims of an intellectual theatre, like the absurdist type lauded by Solórzano.

As to the value of the idea-content of absurdist theatre, which is conventionally linked to existentialist concepts of solitude and alienation, Ibargüengoitia again writes as a dissenter. He disputes the notion that anguish and loneliness are virtues. In his parody of the existentially concerned, he would have these playwrights exclaim: "Estamos sitiados, estamos frustrados, mientras más solo está el hombre, es más hombre" (16.2: 30).

Despite his aversion to conventional critical interpretations of absurdist theatre, Ibargüengoitia does not reject categorically all such works. His review of the performance of *Fando y Lis* directed by Alexandro was, in fact, highly favorable: "La dirección fue tan sencilla como la obra en sí—creo que muy respetuosa e intensamente emotiva . . ." (31).

The key word in that appraisal is "emotiva," which summarizes his preceding discussion of the play's impact. Its peculiar blend of perverse behavior

and sentimental reverence appeals to emotion, not reason, and the sad denouement "tiene que ser conmovedora" (31). Jibing Solórzano, Ibargüengoitia continues:

No entiendo cómo alguien puede estar sentado en una butaca viendo durante dos horas en escena una relación sadomasoquista sin participar activamente en ella. El único comportamiento verdaderamente crítico en estas circunstancias es salirse del teatro. (31)

Ibargüengoitia, in short, esteemed both the written play and the performance of *Fando y Lis* because it differed from, or perhaps transcended, the generic abstractionist features of absurdism through its display of passion: ". . . esta obra es erótica. Ahora bien, ¿cuándo ha escrito Beckett una obra erótica?" (31)

### Brecht and Alienation

Ibargüengoitia's critique of the idea that, in absurdist theatre, the spectator ought to maintain a cool and objective posture leads logically to a confrontation with the theories and practices of Brechtians, who, for him, constitute "un culto entre los jóvenes directores del mundo entero" (17.7: 30). He feels that the patently Brechtian technique of distancing or *alejamiento*, which means that the actor "en vez de estar poseído por el personaje lo está observando y criticando" (17.7: 31), breeds pedantry and is untheatrical. Arguing by analogy, he imagines a version of Hamlet's famous soliloquy relegated to a third-person account by Horatio designed to achieve alienation:

—Vi a Hamlet paseándose por los pasillos de Elsinore y diciendo para sí: "Ser o no ser, he allí la cuestión," y otras cosas más acerca de si más vale morir que vivir. (17.7: 30)

Taken to extremes of objectivity which eliminate the emotional content of the performance, theatre becomes "una novela para analfabetos" (30).<sup>1</sup>

The historical setting in Brecht, a masking device intended to stimulate the intellectual process of the viewer as he/she unravels the symbolic relation between yesteryear's sagas and the political crises of more recent vintage, may actually impede discovery. The problem is that the scenery and costuming required to create a credible historical replication tend to obscure the play's relevance to the political realities of today. The historical tail, in other words, wags the contemporary dog.

His review of Brecht's *Antígona* contains a criticism of that sort. Exotic paraphernalia such as masks, fans and gongs, accompanied by inexplicable ritual movements, distract the viewer and convey the impression of "una representación esotérica," one worthy of the Master of Ceremonies in the Vatican (17.7: 30).

Even when the Brechtian political symbolism is readily decipherable, the message may not be relevant. If, in *Antígona*, Creon is Hitler and the Thebans are the German people awaiting the spoils of conquest, then what lessons are to be learned by a Mexican audience? The only political moral Ibargüengoitia sees is that Mexico should not invade Guatemala. This message is not, in any case, germane for Mexicans, who have no desire to despoil the nation to their south. In Ibargüengoitia's sardonic view:

El problema de los tebanos de Brecht, es decir, de los alemanes, era su exceso de seguridad y su orgullo, y nosotros tenemos complejo de inferioridad, así que nos traigan otra obra si quieren que aprendamos algo útil. (17.7: 30)

### Theatre of Aggression

Ibargüengoitia succinctly defines "teatro de agresión" as a theatrical performance designed to expose the spectator to "algo que no quiere ver" (15.8: 30), presumably to awaken the viewer to the presence of unpleasant social or psychological problems which should be addressed. He cites as examples of this theater works performed by the Mexican Teatro de Vanguardia ranging from a turn-of-the-century psychodrama by Strindberg up through those by the previously mentioned playwrights usually called absurdists: Beckett, Ionesco and Genet. Ibargüengoitia does not question the validity of these dramatists' ideas but, rather, the effect of the dramatic interpretation on the audience.

He is not, in this case, addressing the issue of hyper-intellectuality in a work or its performance but rather, in sharp contrast, to a particular kind of interpretation that relies on strong emotional impact. What he calls "theatre of aggression," practiced by many vanguardist groups of the time, is historically rooted in Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty and aims to achieve audience awareness not via the intellect but through a form of shock therapy.

In reviewing director Alexandro's rendition of Genet's *Las criadas*, Ibargüengoitia notes that the performances had scant moral effect on the audience. Several of the spectators, "buenas personas" and prosperous, were lured by the title which promised—in Ibargüengoitia's tongue-in-cheek account—a tale on the relationship between them and their maids. But this *gente bien*, alerted by an early scene involving a whipping, abandoned the theatre in

droves well before the diabolical characters of the play moved into high gear. Only momentarily annoyed, the contented middle-class audience could be expected to indulge further its conventional tastes in another theatre, "viendo las obras completas de Alfonso Paso" (15:8: 30), the bland and eminently popular Spanish playwright of the 1950's.

In time, jests Ibargüengoitia, the insensitive bourgeois public may be replaced by a worse group, "un público *snob*," which will attend to enjoy seeing how the director attacks the complacent, how he or she smites "en ausencia a los filisteos" (30). The snob audience is worse than the Philistines because it is nonreactive, "no participa" (30); that is, it neither emotes nor learns anything new.

The snobs concur with the director that "toda obra de arte lleva implícita una agresión" (31). The director may go even further: "no tiene empacho en agredir no sólo al público, sino al autor de la obra que está montando . . ." (15:8: 31). Which is say, the director's principles may lead into a willful distortion of the text and of the dramatic conditions of the original work.

Ibargüengoitia sees theatre of aggression as a problematical undertaking in his country:

. . . por una parte, se trata de montar espectáculos que por definición son desagradables, por otra, de que el espectador acuda a ser molestado, y pague. ¿Habrá en México diez mil gentes capaces de aceptar esta condición? (15:8:30)

It may fail to attract, much less convert, its target audience.

### Didactic Theatre

For Ibargüengoitia "el teatro didáctico" necessarily distorts reality. The message dramatist, if she or he were to talk with the audience, might say: "La vida no es así; sin embargo, voy a contarles esta anécdota para que saquen alguna enseñanza de ella" (17:9: 31). Ibargüengoitia apparently believed that virtually all didactic and thesis drama is an undesirable continuum which comprehends diverse forms and modes—naturalistic, symbolic, absurdist, religious, historical, political—in so far as they contain a strong message content. The "lessons" expressed in a play, whether moral or social in nature, are like incrustations fixed onto the work and the performance; and they interrupt the causal linkage required of good theatre (17:9: 31).

In several of his reviews of didactic works, he also questions the utility and the validity of the message itself. As for utility, we have seen in his review of Brecht's *Antígona*, for example, that its anti-Nazi thesis, while no doubt

commendable in a general sense, had no practical application to modern Mexico. In other reviews he points out contradictions within the didactic framework of certain plays; that is, the message itself is illogical or inconsistent.

Among his favorite targets are historical plays which work the indigenous/foreign theme. The hallowed figure of Cuauhtémoc invariably stirred Ibargüengoitia to the heights of sarcasm.<sup>2</sup> In specific reference to Julio Prieto's play and Salvador Novo's book of that title, Ibargüengoitia asks, in effect, why that personage has become a symbol of racial pride and anti-imperialism in Mexico. As for the racial issue, he asserts that only one in ten Mexicans has Aztec blood. "¿Por qué tomar entonces tan a pecho lo que le pasó a esa raza?" (17.4: 29)

Apart from the demographic insignificance of the modern Aztecs, Ibargüengoitia questions the validity of the political symbolism implicit in the heroic picture of Cuauhtémoc and other Aztec leaders. Were they less imperialistic or more democratic than the Spaniards or other indigenous peoples? Doubtful, according to the debunking critic. Cuauhtémoc is not a legitimate symbol of resistance to oppression, for he himself was an oppressor: "El tuvo esclavos, y si le hubieran dado tiempo, hubiera sido un déspota como todos sus parientes . . ." (17.4: 29).

Ibargüengoitia then inverts the political message suggested by the partisan phrase "Cuauhtémoc no ha muerto." That is more true than its framers realize, he claims, for "los demás indios, que eran sus esclavos, siguieron siéndolo de los españoles y ahora de 'las clases opresoras'" (17.4: 29). Cuauhtémoc, ironically interpreted by Ibargüengoitia as a prominent member of an oppressive ruling class and not as a political martyr, is indeed alive and well.

The Spanish-Aztec issue is one aspect of a larger problem, which is the tendency to view history in terms of a struggle between good and evil. The conservative-versus-liberal polemic is an obvious political manifestation of the schismatic approach to the past, but repercussions are also felt in the arts:

Si esta peculiaridad del mexicano de ver el mundo como una película de vaqueros, con villanos y "muchacho," se refiriera sólo a la política, no tendría tanta importancia; pero lo malo es que en el campo del arte sucede exactamente lo mismo. (16.2:30)

He criticized this kind of western-movie scenario in several Mexican plays. Wilberto Cantón's *Tan cerca del cielo*, one of the numerous renditions of the Maximiliano and Carlota saga, reflects a moralistic categorization of the characters. Benito Juárez, to the left, is "bueno"; also among the good are the *pueblo*, because it was liberal, and even the anti-Juárez general Mejía, because

he was Indian (15.12: 28). The bad characters include Napoleon III, as foreign imperialist, the wealthy, for being conservative, and Maximilian's generals (excepting Mejía), as reactionaries.

Maximilian is accorded the customary tragic dimensions, as the leader who wanted to do good but failed. But Ibargüengoitia questions his heroism. Perhaps he was another ambitious imperialist or, on the other hand, just plain stupid for allowing himself to be used as the cat's paw in a French intervention. And then maybe Napoleon III was wise, and not treacherous, to withdraw support from his foolish pawn. Mexican should be grateful to the French emperor: "Si el Imperio [de Maximiliano] era una cosa mala para el país, Napoleón hizo bien en negarle su ayuda . . ." (15.12: 28).

Ibargüengoitia sees historical figures and situations as complexities not to be reduced to simplistic moral or political schemes through theatrical representation.

### Academic Criticism

According to Ibargüengoitia, several critics, especially those of academic background and status, were guilty on two counts. They were unduly concerned with the classification of works by source and content; and they tended to issue sweeping generalizations on the merit of entire bodies of drama and literature.

He ridicules the cosmic classificational schemes of figures like his former mentor Rodolfo Usigli and the Spaniard Guillermo Díaz Plaja who would, in his opinion, reduce all literature and drama to cyclical periods of classicism and romanticism. Díaz Plaja, in the course of a lecture:

. . . tomando un gis ponía una raya horizontal en el pizarrón, y después—en cosa de un cuarto de hora—despachaba la historia entera de la literatura y del arte en una curva sinuosa que tenía como eje la línea horizontal, y que significaba la tendencia dominante de cualquier momento histórico. (16.2: 30)

Also noted with opprobrium is the theory of Francisco Monterde that the great Mexican dramatists surface only at the end and beginning of centuries (30). This lesson in historical inevitability was depressing, quips Ibargüengoitia, for mid-century playwrights like himself whose works could only be for naught: "así que no nos quedaba más que resignarnos" (38).

Grand generalizations like "El arte de una época debe corresponder al pensamiento de la misma" (30) shift the focus away from the artistic value of the work toward wayward considerations of the presumed *zeitgeist* of the age in



question. A student, after exposure to a few years of historical schemes of this sort, may even be freed from the onerous task of actually reading individual works. Why bother, if the "pensamiento" or "concepto" is known beforehand (30)?

Another problem with classificational schemes is that the value judgments which accompany them are wildly contradictory. Thus, for Usigli the Spanish theatre—especially that of the Siglo de Oro—"in toto se va a la basura," whereas Julio Jiménez Rueda spoke for an entire year "elogiosamente del teatro español del Siglo de Oro" (30). Such contradictory appraisals from theorists and critics lead Ibargüengoitia to see an underlying subjectivity, which, if frankly stated, would be as follows: "El arte de una época corresponde a lo que a mí me da la gana" (30).

If the idea or governing concept of the artistic products of a period or movement were paramount, then perhaps only the first works of the time in question should be read or seen, since the later ones are mere repetitions. In his review of Arrabal's *Fando y Lis*, Ibargüengoitia notes that virtually all the critics cited Beckett as a model for Arrabal: "discípulo e imitador de Beckett," "—Es Beckett," etc. (16.4: 30). Why see a play by Arrabal if he is Beckett? Genealogical charting is useless as a tool for appreciating the performance of a given work: "¿Qué adelantamos en el conocimiento de la obra? Nada." (30)

Ibargüengoitia's attitude to classification and source-hunting is most clearly summarized in his words on the Cuban critic Rine Leal's critique of Ibargüengoitia's last play, *El atentado*. Leal had written that the piece, set in the time of the assassination of Obregón, is indebted, "en su aspecto formal, a Brecht" and in its theme and content "a la historia reciente de México" (17.12: 28). This approach, common among "críticos de todo el mundo" and based on the assumption that a work can be explained by "sus antecedentes y fuentes," serves accusatory rather than critical ends; in other words, to show that a given work is "un plagio, o cuando menos no es original" (17.12: 28).

Another sort of academic approach criticized is that of purists—including both critics and directors—who believe in "una sola interpretación correcta." That is never the case, for in the moment a play is completed, in Ibargüengoitia's liberal interpretation, it will be subject to reinterpretation by its readers and performers in accordance with their background, "su raza, su condición, sexo, clase social, etcétera" (17.1: 30).

Ibargüengoitia himself had solid academic credentials in theatre studies—a Master's degree in drama theory from UNAM after study with Usigli—but his bent was decidedly anti-academic. Classifiers, codifiers and purists are for him among the undistinguished believers in "la Historia del Arte, en la Historia del

Teatro, en la Historia Universal, en la Enciclopedia Espasa Calpe, en la Real Academia de la Lengua y en el Directorio Telefónico" (17.1: 31).

### Imitation and Appreciation

This exegesis of Ibargüengoitia's views on theatre has thus far focused on what he disliked, both in theatre and in criticism of the same. His negative judgments are in fact more prevalent than his endorsements, and he seemed to be at odds with much of the theatre and drama criticism, both Mexican and foreign, receiving attention in the early 1960's. This alienation from the critical mainstream had to be a factor in his decision to abandon the stage and stage criticism, which he attributed to a feeling of disgust for the theatre. As he wrote in his final article for the *Revista de la Universidad de México*: "me voy porque ya me cansé de tener que ir al teatro (actividad que he llegado a detestar) . . ." (18.11: 29).

But despite his many acidic comments and his departure on a sour note, Ibargüengoitia had earlier attempted to outline his ideas on behalf of the types of theatre and of theatre criticism which he admired. These two functions may be represented, respectively, by his terms "teatro imitativo" and "apreciación."

The theatre of imitation maintains both unity of action and verisimilitude, the latter most especially in dialogue and psychological reaction of the characters. Causal relations, "causa y efecto," must be logically and fluidly developed; and concision and premeditation are essential:

Una de las reglas fundamentales que debe seguir un autor de teatro imitativo es la de nunca escribir un parlamento que no adelante la acción o establezca un rasgo característico del personaje. . . . (17.9: 31)

Ibargüengoitia is a stickler for verisimilitude. The dramatist must, in his opinion, avoid language uncharacteristic of the personage and situation and—even—costume and scenery that convey any note of falsity.

Good theatre is a superior form of entertainment, not a learning experience: *deleitar*, not *enseñar*, is the watchword. Theatre is demanding, "se paga muy caro con trabajo, con hambres y con dinero," but it is not a civic or moral duty; it should be a pleasure:

Un placer para el que lo escribe, para el que lo representa y para el que lo ve. . . . La única manera de hacer que la gente vaya al teatro es darle un teatro capaz de producir placer, y ese teatro sólo se logra cuando está hecho con placer. (16.1: 31)

High drama and tragedy, as earlier noted, should move the audience in an emotive, not intellectual, way to experience "la piedad y el terror" (16.4: 31), presumably the words of Ibarguengoitia for Aristotle's cathartic fear and pity.

Although generally an adherent of realism, Ibarguengoitia does not rule out symbolic theatre, provided that its symbolism is subtle, suggestive and poetic, as in Harold Pinter's works (17.9: 31).

As for the labor of criticism, Ibarguengoitia's favorite term is *apreciación*. The critic should transcend the academic and intellectual tasks of classification and conceptualization in order to appreciate the distinctive qualities of the individual work:

Se dice que tal cosa es casi un vaudeville o que es una farsa . . . y nadie se ocupa de explicar si es un buen vaudeville o una mala farsa—que sería lo pertinente. (16.2: 31)

"Lo pertinente" in the process of critical appreciation is, in the final analysis, the judgment on the merit of the work, based on its unique characteristics. Criticism or *apreciación*, Ibarguengoitia suggests, is itself an art "que requiere ciertas condiciones físicas y mentales" (16.2: 31), difficult to define and probably the same as the intangible but essential exercise of good taste.

### **Ibarguengoitia, Angry Young Traditionalist**

The image of angry young man and *bête noire* among Mexican critics that Ibarguengoitia projected in his articles for *La Revista de la Universidad de México* between 1961 and 1964 sharply contrasts with his critical approach, which is basically conservative. He emerges from those writings as a kind of witty technician, a critic who esteems coherence and realism in plot, dialogue and historical setting. Theatre viewing is for him not primarily an intellectual or moral exercise but instead a pleasurable and emotive experience. Good criticism depends, ultimately, on the integrity and comprehension of the critic.

Ibarguengoitia was, for his time, a nonconformist among theatre reviewers, but, in a broader historical context, he actually adhered to rather traditional and conventional principles of criticism and dramaturgy.

Faithful to his vow of 1964, Ibarguengoitia did virtually abandon the theatre, as critic and as dramatist; and he pursued, instead, a successful career as columnist and novelist. His thirty-one articles for the *Revista de la Universidad de México* pale in numerical comparison to the nearly 700 columns he would later write for *Excelsior* and *Vuelta* (Rehder 139-140), but one sees in his early pieces a developed and surprisingly mature critical philosophy, a characteristic

outlook that he would later apply to other arts, ranging from mural painting to cinema.

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## Notes

1. Brecht scholars might object that Ibargüengoitia parodies vulgar Brechtians rather than a truly Brechtian theatre. "Like the structure of an epic poem, a Brechtian play often *alternates* [stress added] dialogue with narration . . ." (Brockett and Findlay 250). Brecht and his serious disciples would probably allow Hamlet to speak his piece.

2. See, for comparison, Jorge Ibargüengoitia's malicious parody of Usigli's *Corona de luz*, "Sublime alarido del ex alumno herido," originally published in *México en la Cultura* in 1961 and cited in full by Leñero, 79-83.

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